

Google's Self-Driving Car: Built for the Defense Industry

Hands-free driving, cars that park themselves, an unmanned car driven by a search-engine company? We've seen that movie. It ends with robots harvesting our bodies for energy.

- Dodge car commercial, 2011

My fiancée is a dancer in her soul. I'm a robot.

- Anthony Levandowski

Anthony Levandowski is currently a lead engineer in the effort to create the Google self-driving car. The project has progressed rapidly and there are already states, including California, that have legalized these autonomous vehicles.

He was also one of the architects of google streetview—the real-world mapping project that sent cars out to document and photograph every block along every street. These cars also recorded ip addresses (which identify computer networks) and mac addresses (which identify specific pieces of hardware). This massive surveillance project was occasionally met with opposition: The cars have been blockaded, vandalized and, in one case, attacked by a 70 year-old man with an axe.

“Don’t be evil” is Google’s motto and, fittingly, they have a utopian vision for our digital future. Missing in their utopia is the workers in the Foxconn factories, where nets were recently installed to prevent the frequent suicides brought on by conditions there. Absent from their vision are the families paid pennies a day to recycle tiny amounts of precious metals from vast electronic waste dumps. Even at the Googleplex (the google office park in Mountain View), similar divisions exist. Red badge employees—who clean the bathrooms, pull espresso shots, cook gourmet meals and wipe crumbs from the ping pong tables—are given none of the perks and privileges of techie White Badge employees.

It is not naivete that drives the heads of Google and people like Anthony Levandowski to go forward with their plans to create technology that only reinforces the domination that exists in society. Google actively collaborates with the defense industry, an industry more and more focussed on quelling social dissent.

Google has just acquired Boston Dynamics, a military contractor that has created a dozen war robots. The most disturbing of them is the WildCat, a boar-like robot that can run 30 miles an hour and quickly right itself after an accident. This war robot was sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the same organization that invented the internet itself.

The self-driven car has been another pet project of the DARPA for many years. It sponsored a recurring Grand Challenge for people designing self-driving vehicles, hoping someone would crack open the new technology. Anthony Levandowski was one of the wonder kids who flocked to these competitions, looking for a federal handout and fame. Now, with Google handing him more money than he could ever dream of, Levandowski is working long hours bringing this dream of the military into reality.

The Surveilled Spaces of Levandowski's Luxury Condos

Anthony Levandowski is currently trying to create his own cyber-capitalist utopia in the great city of Berkeley. After growing up in affluent Marin suburb, he began his career in the city in 1998 when he started attending UC Berkeley. Before that he had already started a small tech company that allowed Petco to sell its products on the web via credit card purchase.

As he pursued his masters in science degree, Levandowski started a company that created computer tablets designed to display blueprints at construction sites. The reasoning behind their venture was that updating and then printing new blueprints took a few days and slowed construction time. With this new product, construction companies

could create condominiums, malls, and subdivisions with the least possible delay and the maximum profit. In praise of his prodigious business acumen, the administration-run UC Berkeley News decided to run an article on him in 2003, championing his ability to make money and enable the housing bubble that was just starting to expand.

Fast forward to the present and Levandowski has bought a house for his wife and children near College and Ashby. In addition to this cozy two-story affair, Levandowski has also purchased a property on the corner of Dwight and Fulton, just one block from Shattuck Avenue. At this location, he has hired the Nautilus Group to construct a proposed 77-unit apartment building call Garden Village complete with rooftop gardens, 24-hour surveillance, private security, and a fleet of electric vehicles parked in an underground garage. The residents will have the luxury of renting these cars whenever they want to cruise out to the beach for a dip.

The Nautilus Group is composed of designers and builders who have created military installations, malls, and hospitals. Levandowski is now making his contribution to the further sterilization and gentrification of Downtown Berkeley and Shattuck Avenue.

The proposed project is a testament to the arrogance, disconnection, and luxury of the ruling class. Growing their own vegetables in a rooftop garden and selling them to other wealthy people allows them, somehow, to pretend that the planet is not being ravaged by the same economy they depend on for their wealth, comfort, and safety.

The residents of Garden Village will inhabit a micro-world in which their movements are constantly watched and overseen by security personnel. These wealthy students or well-paid professionals will live in small boxes connected by walkways. Seven of these units will be dedicated to housing low-income renters. Low-income units are not included because Levandowski or Nautilus desired this feature, but because Berkeley city law mandated it. No doubt that the surveillance and security in the development plan is directed at these residents as much it is at anybody else.

Development and surveillance go hand in hand. Implicit in Levandowski's Garden Village is the omnipresence of surveillance in our urban environments. These aims are explicit in other programs, like Oakland's Domain Awareness Center and the nationwide “TrapWire” surveillance program. Surveillance and control are central to the technological future proposed by Google and other pro-tech futurists.

The Counterforce

Berkeley has long suffered under the grip of the Berkeley Police Department and the UC system. The university administration and the police have quelled rebellion, harassed the homeless and facilitated development for decades. In the 60's and 70's, thousands of people were swept up in various rebellions, starting with the Free Speech Movement and extending to the communes and armed groups of later years. Back then, the university was a shining tower of nuclear research, collaboration with the military, and overt repression against internal dissent. The young people rebelled against the arrangement of society, confronting monsters like Ronald Reagan, the FBI and the National Guard.

Just a few blocks down Ashby from Levandowski's house is the former site of a series of communes that existed in the 60's and 70's. In one of these communal houses, a group of rebels, freaks, communists and lovers wrote the Berkeley Liberation Program. We offer the following extract:

The civilization of concrete and plastic will be broken and natural things respected ... We will change this deadly Machine which steals our land and rapes our minds, or we will stop its functioning ... The revolution is about our lives. We will fight against the dominating Berkeley life style of affluence, selfishness, and social apathy - and

also against the self-indulgent individualism which masquerades as “doing your own thing.”

In the spirit of honoring the memories of all who died, went crazy, or disappeared on the streets of Berkeley, we wish to expose Anthony Levandowski and the evil he brings into this world.

Preparing for the action, we watched Levandowski step out of his front door. He had Google Glasses over his eyes, carried his baby in his arm, and held a tablet with his free hand. As he descended the stairs with the baby, his eyes were on the tablet through the prism of his Google Glasses, not on the life against his chest. He appeared in this moment like the robot he admits that he is.

There are men and women in the Congo, slaving away in giant pits in order to extract gold and other precious metals from the earth. This gold will go into phones and tablets made by companies like Google, Apple, and Microsoft. Anthony Levandowski has never worked in a pit mine nor will his children. People like him are exempt from this type of degrading and exploitative labor. Instead, he can casually stare at his screens as if there was not human blood making this technology possible, as if there was not a life in his hands.

As Levandowski lives his normal life, building his nuclear family, an unspeakable horror is unfolding. Everything he is building will only help this disastrous economic system continue a bit longer. The self-driving car will allow commuters to get another hour of sleep, talk on their phones in the car, and keep the economy going.

In a promotional video for the Google self-driving car, a blind man is shown getting to where he needs to go with this new technology. In the video, the man decides to go to Taco Bell. In another promotional video for Google Glasses, the user is shown buying products, buying things,

and then buying more stuff. At the very end of the video, the user finds his father on the floor suffering a heart attack. The user calls 911 with his Google Glasses and saves his father. This emotional surprise ending is meant to affirm for the viewer that the product is necessary and good.

The blind man buying Taco Bell and the consumer saving his dad are the heroes of this tech-utopia. The pit miners and factory workers are ignored and forgotten. As long as capitalism functions, everything it is connected to will be poisoned with its sickness. People like Levandowski are gentrifying neighborhoods, flooding the market with noxious commodities, and creating the infrastructure for an unimaginable totalitarianism. This is the evil that we stake our lives against.

We are the counterforce and you might be too. Disengage from the capitalist economy to the best of your ability. Create autonomous areas where the laws and rituals of capitalism are ignored. Do not look back at the flickering lights. Develop ties with your neighbors. Defend the land. Use your position in society—whether as a felon, a barista, an immigrant or whatever your experience—as your starting point for your revolt against it. Have courage. Find others who feel the same way and block a tech bus. Steal from the techies you babysit for. Take down surveillance cameras. Go hard: The time is now.

FIGHT EVIL JOIN THE REVOLUTION

the counterforce

